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Author(s): David Campbell

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Authentic Assessment and Authentic Standards

Mr. Campbell sets down a few basic assumptions about what education — true education — is and outlines how we might attempt to determine whether or not it has been accomplished.

BY DAVID CAMPBELL

SEVERAL times a year I volunteer to prepare future teachers for the “general knowledge” section of the Praxis Series examination — a typical standardized test. It is mostly a test of recall of information, and I treat it as a test of short-term memory. It is filled with trivia of little significance for effective teaching. This sort of test controls the future for these students, just as such tests now control just about all of our lives. A great deal has already been written about such tests, and I’m not about to add much more. But I am going to propose that, if we must have such a written assessment at all, it at least be an authentic test.

First, let me set down a few basic assumptions about what education — true education — is. Then I’d like to outline how we might attempt to determine whether or not it has been accomplished. I’m not going to argue these points but simply to

DAVID CAMPBELL is chair of the Department of Educational Studies, California University of Pennsylvania, California, Pa.



state them, because most people apparently have no idea what true education is. They confuse scores on standardized tests and performance on television quiz shows with education. Neither of these popular entertainments has very much to do with education. They are essentially a “let’s pretend” kind of education that keeps a great many rather dim people happy — among them, unfortunately, many school and government officials. Here goes.

- Education is not memorizing facts but rather connecting information to achieve understanding. Such connection is accomplished by each individual; it is based on previous experience and not usually, if ever, determined by the organization of textbooks and courses.

- No “subject” (not algebra and not Latin) trains the mind or teaches one to think “abstractly” so as to be transferable to other subject areas. The best estimate of the proportion of people who really need to know algebra, for example, is somewhat less than 10%.

- Not knowing what everyone needs to know, the public schools (and too many colleges) attempt to teach everyone everything, a just-in-case curriculum.

- The popular assumption is that, after “taking” many courses throughout their entire youth, students will somehow manage to integrate all this information into a general understanding of how the world is constituted and works. Only rarely does this happen; most people, including teachers, never make such connections.

- The idea of “academics” has been stolen from higher education — mostly from graduate school — and then imposed upon the general population, of whom no more than 20% learn in that fashion and for whom such narrowly focused, academic studies are absolutely inappropriate. The same dim people who are reassured that they’re really doing education when they pursue a “bunch o’ facts” then consider that this “let’s pretend” academic education should be the standard suitable for everyone. Thus most people, at least in their formal schooling, have never experienced true education. On the other hand, many of them have experienced real education in their out-of-school lives, but no one counts that as education. And a very few schools do achieve some hint of real education, but it is rarer still in academic classes.

- Authentic education cannot really be measured accurately in any formal way —

at least not immediately after it has taken place. Real education usually requires a long period before it becomes evident. Of course, this makes it messy; it’s not neat, orderly, and reducible to a set of scores. Thus no attempt is made to assess real education. It’s neater, cleaner, and simpler to use standardized, guess-the-correct-answer tests.

What follows is my attempt to measure real education, even if we are determined to use a written or oral examination format rather than a performance format (e.g., performing a piece of music or repairing a VCR). I have used many of these problems/questions in board reviews, conducted before sending our secondary education majors out for student teaching.

For the most part, the responses of the soon-to-be student teachers have been embarrassing for them and for their professors, for they haven’t a clue and are often angry that I should ask such “nonacademic” questions. Indeed, on one occasion one of the “academic” professors protested that my questions were unfair because they hadn’t been included in the students’ coursework. The student in question was an earth science major, and I had asked, “What are the disadvantages of building a dam, say, for example, the Glen Canyon Dam or the Aswan Dam in Egypt?” Not a clue! Then I asked, “This area we are in is honeycombed with old coal mines. What does that tell you about its history?” The student couldn’t begin to answer or even guess when I asked him to explain the causes for the river meander right outside our window. None of this insight and knowledge had been part of his “academic” education.

The assessment questions I will now pose can seldom be answered by my college students — or indeed by the inservice teachers I encounter. They’ve spent some 16 to 20 years in formal education and have bits and pieces of facts and vocabulary stored away, but they possess almost no real understanding.

- Discuss human nature. What are we “naturally” like, and what problems must we confront in order to make that nature fit into the modern society in which we now live?

- What causes a tornado? In the U.S., where and when are they likely to occur? Why?

- Discuss the effects of the human quest for fame and power throughout history.

Include some examples from literature, history, and the arts.

- Using your knowledge of science, what are we to make of the persistence of the popular belief in extraterrestrial beings and their visits to Earth?

- Why are most oceans and seas salty? Were they always so? Are they becoming more or less salty? Why? What are the long-term implications of this process?

- What effect did the events of American history in the 1830s and 1840s have on the Civil War? Are there any similar circumstances today that are currently causing problems?

- Using your knowledge of natural and sexual selection, explain such features of human anatomy as forward-facing eyes, the long nose, the long roots of the incisor teeth, nipples on men, and the wider female pelvis.

- Explain the meaning of the terms *equinox* and *solstice*. Draw a diagram and provide a written explanation.

- Design an ecologically friendly home in Florida and New England.

- What mathematics is required to launch a space shuttle? Discuss the problems of such a launch and the considerations required for a successful launch.

- If your cousin is now twice your age, will she ever be twice your age again? Why?

- Why is it colder on a mountaintop, even though it’s closer to the sun?

- Explain how our solar system works.

- Discuss the statement “The government of the U.S. is based upon the mistrust of power.”

- If I leave London at noon and take a six-hour flight to New York, at what time will I arrive?

- What are the problems associated with population growth, the affluent society, and modern technology?

- Is human creativity a part of our nature or something learned and encouraged? Elaborate.

- Discuss the social contract and its implications for ourselves and the larger society.

- Discuss the rise and fall of empires. Use examples from such historical empires as Egypt, Greece, Rome, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union. Discuss the implications for America.

- What does the U.S. Supreme Court do?

- How have societies dealt with crime and nonconformity in the past? What are

your ideas on the subject?

- Discuss the functioning of the family unit, past, present, and future.

- Analyze why sports play such a significant role in our society.

- Trace the way laws arise and how our system compares with other societies.

Obviously, I could continue indefinitely. Though some of these questions depend more directly on factual knowledge and can be answered quite briefly, there are no simple right or wrong answers. For the most part these questions deal with general education, with what an adult of any developed society should know and have pondered in order to be a citizen of a free and democratic society. And they reflect the general knowledge we all should have about how our world functions and affects us. There can be no guessing here from four possible short answers, but what you know and how you think will immediately be obvious. And how effectively you've been educated will also be immediately apparent, which is precisely what very few people want.

These questions give you some idea of the kind of material an "educated" person ought to be able to deal with. After 12 to 16 years of intensive, concentrated education, most people should be able to consider such problems and issues. The assumption is that the first four to five years of formal education will impart the basic skills of literacy and computation. Then we can get on with the task of helping young people connect information and their own experience to a wider world of understanding and thoughtfulness. For some of us, being able to consider such questions is what education is. This is what makes teaching more than the sterile delivery of information and curriculum that now masquerades as education. Today, as in the past, only a very few have experienced this true education.

What takes place in most schools and colleges, however, is little more than a pretense. It has the look of education but none of the substance. It's mostly ritual, meant to impress and not to accomplish much more than social ranking and sorting. John Dewey said it best of all: "The end of education is more education." He was not referring to what takes place in the institutions calling themselves educational. He meant that education must be a continuous expansion of a web of connections and understanding that contin-

ues throughout one's life. It can never be parceled out into years, terms, or grade levels, and it defies all attempts to quantify it. Learning "more" is not education, nor is having "taken" a subject or "passed" an examination. These are artificial constructs created to reassure the same dim people who don't have a clue about real education.

What I am essentially describing here is often called wisdom, the understanding that comes with connected thought and critical thinking after long study. It can be nurtured and directed, but it is always an individual accomplishment that most often takes place apart from "formal education." Real teachers seldom use the word "instruction," for they know that what they do is more closely related to modeling, coaching, and organizing the thinking of their students. They create the conditions for education to happen, as is shown so effectively in the new science centers, aquariums, and museums.

The bright hope for the future is that our emerging Information Society will require more of this kind of real education. In this brave new world we might have to really know and understand. Getting 60% of the answers right won't be good enough and will get you fired, not promoted. And

you will never confront the possibility of having to decide which one of five answers is correct; you will have to know and understand. And you must continue to know and understand throughout your life; you will mostly have to educate yourself and won't be able to get away with faking it, cheating, or simply getting by. We can no longer afford to play games and keep up appearances in this reality-based world, and the just-in-case academic curriculum, ancient though it be, will be of little use. If you cannot apply the math you know, then you don't know it — no matter how many tests you passed. If you can't work well with a team to solve a problem, then you cannot think independently and teach yourself what you need to know. No bright future awaits you. In this new reality, years spent sitting at a desk listening, memorizing information, and immediately forgetting it will no longer suffice. Test scores and elaborate standards will mean nothing in this performance-based situation. Only what you really know and can do will matter.

Currently, our "education" system does not do any of this. Instead, we have Mayan priests continuing to build temples and monuments to the past while their civilization crumbles around them. ■

